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Why Michigan needed affirmative action

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In one of its most significant decisions affecting race in America in modern times, the U.S. Supreme Court will soon decide the fate of the **affirmative action** program developed at the University of **Michigan**.

To many of its critics, most notably President George W. Bush, the **Michigan** plan is a misguided exercise in social engineering, an institutional effort to redress a social ill.

That perception is wrong. **Michigan's affirmative action** plan grew out of an honest, searing appraisal of the vicious physical, psychological and racist practices and customs that flourished on the **Michigan** campus for years. What makes the school unique is its willingness to change the nature of its campus environment rather than paper over systemic racist flaws.

Michigan's extensive legal defense of its program delves deeply into its past, with case studies of events and trends that spurred the school's need for introspection and change. I am familiar with one case leading to the Supreme Court. It is my own.

I was 17 and barely topped 100 pounds when my parents drove me from New Jersey to Ann Arbor, Mich., in 1966, to enter the university's School of Engineering with a major in aeronautical engineering. For the past decade, **Michigan** has been one of the nation's top 10 producers of black engineers.

But that was not the case in 1966. There was no **affirmative action** then the university was hesitantly relaxing the quota that previously kept us out.

I was one of 60 blacks in the freshman class at a university with about 32,000 students. I was alone in the engineering school, located across campus from Markley Hall, the new dormitory about a block from the highly regarded University Hospital. I was one of the first students in the new building, passing rows of huge bay windows to get to the entrance in the middle of the block.

It wasn't quite noon when I walked to the corner, watched my parents' car disappear from sight, and set out to explore the campus. I stepped past the centerline in the middle of the street when a man on a Harley Davidson gunned his cycle and aimed it for the middle of my back.

I was struck off center, thrown the rest of the way across the street, striking my hip against the curb in front of the girls' dorm as the cycle roared away. The sharp pain told me I'd cracked it, and I lay there waiting for help or the strength to move.

Moments later the ambulance appeared, and the attendant looked at me and said, brusquely, "I don't pick up niggers."

The ambulance drove off. The small crowd walked away. I dragged myself to a

nearby tree, pulled myself up and waited for the shooting pains to stop. I took a step. The pain was dizzying, and I crashed to the ground and lay there a moment, panting. People stepped around me, avoiding me as if I were diseased. Cars drove by. No one stopped. I was alone.

It took what felt like an eternity to crawl and hop the block to the hospital, where a row of wheelchairs waited in the entrance. I pulled myself into one and rested.

"Get out of the chair, boy," said the hospital guard.

"I was hit by a guy on a motorcycle," I said. "I think my hip is broken."

He stood in front of me, glaring, and slowly put his hand on his gun.

"Those chairs are not for you, nigger. Get out now."

Unlike a lot of black Americans, I know my family history. Walker Elliot Smith, my Grandpop, told stories every time he visited. We weren't freed by Abraham Lincoln and Yankee troops.

Walker Elliot Randolph used an ax to take his overseer's head and then his horse and, in 1856, he fled the Virginia plantation started by John Randolph and Pocahontas and went to **Michigan**. There, he joined the cavalry and spent the next nine years shoeing horses and killing Confederates. After the war, he returned to Virginia to reclaim his family and set up a forge. He changed his last name to Smith, denoting his new profession.

In 1896, with Reconstruction dead, the Ku Klux Klan went around the South settling old scores. Six of them rode up to the Smith home one Sunday and blew him away at his dining room table. The eldest son killed two of them a week later but died in the shootout. The second son killed two more the following month, then fled to Detroit. His grandson was also named Walker Elliot Smith, but he later changed it to the ring name of Sugar Ray Robinson.

The Klan burned down the homestead, and Walker's widow and four remaining children made their way to New York. In 1905, the youngest, Dewey Smith, went back to Virginia to finish the two remaining Klansmen. Taking abuse from racists cut against the family heritage.

But neither Grandpop nor Dad were there in the hospital entrance with me. I would not shame my family name by crawling away.

I got up and slowly walked to the admissions counter. I told them what happened, and they told me to find my way to X-ray, at the other end of the hospital. I leaned against the wall and walked, thinking of home and trying to ignore the feeling in my hip.

I had to stand for the X-ray - the table patients normally lie on was for whites. Then I was directed to a room on another floor and told to wait for a physician. I waited there three hours.

I left the room and walked over to a group of doctors and asked when someone would come to talk to me about my injury.

"You're still here?" said one of the doctors. "You have a broken hip. Stay off of it. Now get the hell out of here."

I went to a pay phone in the lobby and called my dorm room to see if my roommate had arrived. Tom, a Jewish student from a Detroit suburb who had never met any blacks, ran to the hospital and helped me back to the dorm. He found a medical supply store in town and bought a pair of crutches.

Then the phone rang, and a male voice said, "We're going to kill you, nigger." And he said there were far more students in the KKK than there were blacks on campus, and they firmly intended to drive us out. It was too bad I didn't die that afternoon, he said. But if I didn't leave the campus, I would die soon, painfully. I hung up. The phone rang 15 minutes later. Another male voice repeated the refrain, "Leave or die." And he went into graphic detail about how they intended to torture and kill me.

I hung up. But they took turns, calling every 15 minutes, round the clock, telling me where I had been, whom I had sat next to, letting me know how vulnerable I was. Letting me know they were all around, always watching, always waiting for a chance to kill me. Different voices. Same message.

Tom and I went to the dorm director, but he refused to get involved. Neither the phone company nor the police would trace the calls. We were on our own.

I told Tom to take back the crutches. Tom, a pre-med student who is now a child psychiatrist in San Francisco, warned that if I tried to walk on the hip the way it was it would never heal properly I'd always be in pain and it would disintegrate over time. I didn't dispute his prognosis.

But I couldn't let them know I was hurt, for then I'd be a walking target. They had to believe I was capable of defending myself. In the dorm, I didn't use the shower on the floor unless Tom or Paul, a Jewish student across the hall who is now a New York City attorney, came with me.

The presence of hate groups was not a secret on campus. One of the dorm windows that everyone had to pass to enter Markley was obscured by two large flags: one contained a swastika, the other the stars and bars of the Confederacy. The university saw nothing wrong with this.

By the third day, our nerves were raw. At some point that evening, Tom grabbed the ringing phone and shouted, "Why don't you leave him alone!"

And then I watched as his face turned ashen, and he slammed down the phone. "What did they say to you?"

Tom took a long time to answer. "They said, 'We weren't going to bother you yet, kike, but since you're a nigger-lover . . .'" And they told him what they and the Nazis would do to the Jewish students once the niggers were gone.

I had two hunting knives. I gave one to Tom and we each took half the dorm. We tried every doorknob. If it was unlocked, we opened it. If anyone was on the phone, we cut his cord. If they balked, we threatened to cut them and were prepared to do so.

I entered the room with the student with the flags and made him take down the Confederate battle flag. I cut it up.

Tom later asked why I hadn't cut down the Nazi flag as well.

"That's not my issue, Tom. I'll deal with the Klan, you deal with the Nazis."

Tom called one of the Jewish fraternities on campus and a few minutes later, two of their larger members arrived and accompanied Tom to the room with the offending flag. It, too, came down.

The dorm director was livid and threatened to try to have us expelled for vandalism. We dared him to publicly place the university on the side of Nazis and Klansmen and told him if he kept the racists in check, there would be no problems. If there

were violence, we would not be the only victims.
The phone calls stopped.
I would never lose touch with Tom and Paul.
I would never be able to run again.
I would never lose hope that the university would one day confront and overcome its
past.
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